

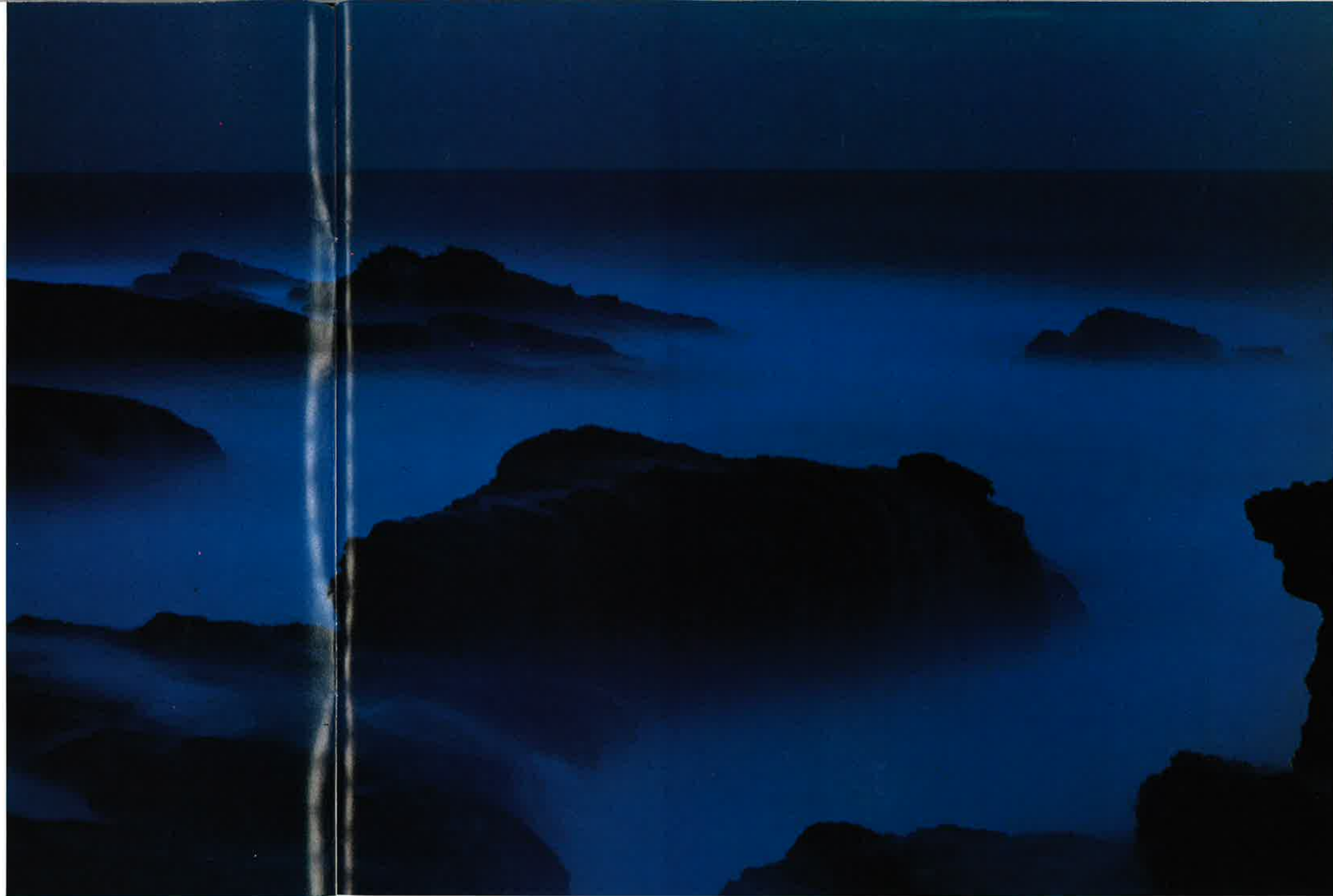
From Baja to Vancouver

ISLANDS OF THE WEST

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*He who has never seen himself surrounded
on all sides by the sea can never possess an idea
of the world, and of his relation to it.*

—Goethe



ON THE WALL in my studio I have a large aerial map of the United States, a mosaic of several hundred photographs taken by a Landsat spacecraft from 567 miles above the earth. It outlines, among other things, the great perplexity of isles, islets, atolls, spits, tongues, necks, capes, harbors, bights, and gunk-holes that characterize our Atlantic seaboard. It outlines, just as dramatically, the virtual hiatus of such configurations along the California, Oregon, and

Washington coasts. Except for Puget Sound the satellite image of our western shore is unwrinkled all the way from the mouth of the Columbia River to San Francisco Bay, a distance of 600 miles. There is one small blip just off the Point Reyes peninsula that marks the Farallons, then nothing for another 300 miles south. No Mount Deserts, Cape Cods, Nantuckets, Long Islands, Chesapeake Bays, Pamlico Sounds, Georgia Sea Islands. No shoals, no cays, no keys. For nearly a thousand miles the seasick sailor has only

California sea lions (Zalophus californianus, left) gather at dusk on a beach on San Miguel Island. A long exposure turns breaking surf into mist in this evening scene at Año Nuevo Island (above).

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Blooming agave, Cabo Norte, Isla Cedros, Baja California (below), and tree sunflowers (Coreopsis gigantea), on an islet off Santa Cruz Island (right).



limited options when he hunts for shelter out here.

Below Point Conception, above Santa Barbara, where the mainland profile looks as if someone had taken a shallow bite out of California's hind end, Landsat offers some small encouragement. Four grey smudges show up in the Santa Barbara Channel, four more flank the San Pedro Channel and the Gulf of Santa Catalina, three more lie a few miles off Imperial Beach near the Mexican border. In the satellite's eye they look like ships anchored along a dent in the North American plate. From any PSA flight bound for San Diego they look like just what they are, the northernmost in a chain of islands that stretches for 500 miles from Point Eugenia, near Guerrero Negro in Baja, to Point Conception—sixteen bleak and battered protrusions of eroded rock, narrow beaches, low vegetation, wind, fog, and swirling sea mist, varying in size from 134 square miles to as little as one-fifth of a square mile.

The satellite eye says nothing about coastal demographics. If it did, the story of offshore occupation in the East would fill volumes; the western region, with the exception of Puget Sound and the San Juans, might warrant a few pages. Of the eight islands that lie below the Mexican border, only one (Isla Cedros) can really claim habitation. The rest consist largely of sand and beds of tortured riprap transforming themselves into cobble. Of the eight that lie within United States territorial waters, one (Santa Catalina) hosts a small tourist town and a resident population, two (San Clemente and San Nicholas) are property of the Navy, and three (Santa Barbara, Anacapa, and San Miguel) belong to you and me—designated by Congress in 1980 as the newest in our system of national parks. The remaining islands off southern California are private property. Santa Rosa is owned by the Vail



and Vickers Corporation, which runs about five thousand head of cattle on it; Santa Cruz is owned jointly by the Stanton and Cherini ranches and The Nature Conservancy. Eventually Santa Rosa and a portion of Santa Cruz are supposed to be included in Channel Islands National Park, though when the transfer from private to public ownership will take place is still unclear.

Off northern California there are only two islands (or island groupings)—tiny Año Nuevo, a few miles north of Monterey Bay, and the Farallons, five granitic rocks of about 111 acres in sum that lie thirty miles due west of San Francisco along the edge of the continental shelf. The former is a state reserve controlled by the California Department of Parks and Recreation; the latter a National Wildlife Refuge under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department. Public

lands. Which is to say they belong to you and me as well.

You and me will find it somewhat difficult, however, to inspect our property should the spirit move us. For one thing navigation around all of California's offshore real estate (with the exception of Santa Catalina—connected to the mainland by a ferry service) can be hazardous under certain conditions. Weather can change in a matter of minutes. Blue sky and a mild breeze can be suddenly transformed into dense fog and gale-force winds; a flat sea unruffled as a millpond can turn into five- and six-foot swells; Capt'n Bligh can be enjoying his preprandial noggin on the poop deck one minute and sailing on his ear the next. It requires one's attention.

For another thing anchorages and landing sites are few and at best involve a white-water adventure through rolling

surf. Visitors to Santa Barbara Island ride in with the surge and leap off their rocking boats onto a metal ladder. Similar acrobatics are required at the eastern end of Anacapa. On the Farallons one is plucked from one's ship by a shore-based crane and swung up, clinging to a rig that resembles a trellis of twine attached to a truck tire, onto a pierlike affair. At Año Nuevo there is no access except by rubber boat across a reef beset by waves that break on one's hapless dinghy from both sides. Harbor seals body-surf alongside, waiting for the real show to begin. One can get ashore at all these places, to be sure, but it takes effort and skill, and is not without risk. Most folks are content to keep their topsiders dry and stay out in the swells.

But the major impediment to visitation—suggesting that fifteen years of developing environmental consciousness

The three islets of Anacapa Island—West, Middle, and East Anacapa—are actually one landform with submerged connections. Only East Anacapa is accessible to the public.

has finally gotten at least limited translation into official policy—is the officialdom as represented by the National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Vail and Vickers, Dr. Carey Stanton; in short, all those organizations and individuals charged with the stewardship of California's islands and their diverse wildlife populations. In various degrees all do their best to protect the native flora and fauna from the earnest sightseer who clomps around the fragile environment mashing plant life, pestering birds and marine mammals, pocketing a few "artifacts" from Indian middens, and occasionally falling off a cliff. Activities are therefore restricted. On the Farallons only biological and ornithological researchers are generally allowed; only a few educational and scientific excursions are permitted on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa; user-days are limited on the National Park islands and visitors' movements are severely circumscribed. Protection of seals and sea lions, bird life, endemic plants, and archeological sites is given top priority by the islands' custodians, and it's a good thing too. The public track record, even in this awkward environment, hasn't been all that hot.

The successive native cultures that inhabited many of the southern islands for at least 7,000 (possibly 30,000 to 40,000) years before the appearance of the white man managed to live in reasonable harmony with their waterbound world. They had neither the numbers (about two thousand by the time Spanish missionaries relocated them to the mainland and engaged their services in the fields of the Lord) nor the technology to foul it up. But by the end of the eighteenth century commercial hunting of the enormous colonies of seals, sea lions, and sea otters began, and over the next hundred years succeeded in virtually eliminating pin-





A former Coast Guard station on Southeast Farallon Island (left) now houses a small crew of field biologists. Any vegetation on rugged Southeast Farallon Island (right) is pulled up in spring by cormorants seeking nesting material.



nipeds (fin-footed marine mammals) from the California coast—indeed, from the entire southern biogeographic region of the eastern Pacific. By the time an International Fur Seal Treaty was signed in 1911, only a few remnant groups were left to save.

While the sealers were denuding the beaches of marine mammals, sheep ranchers went to work on the inland flora. Through overstocking and overgrazing they gradually reduced both pasture and woodland to desert. Through the introduction of cats, rats, rabbits, goats, and pigs, they set in motion changes in endemic biotic communities that would never be reversed. In no sense of the word were these islands ever *populated* by European man, but it took only one light-keeper with a couple of pet Belgian hares, or one shepherd with a taste for goat's milk, to start unraveling millions of years of natural selection. Perhaps the only islands between Baja California and the Pacific Northwest *not* to have suffered from overgrazing and the introduction of exotics are the Farallons—and they were barren to begin with. They did not escape, however, exploitation by pre-Sierra Club

man, whose 1850s representatives developed a lip-smacking fondness for murre eggs. Between the founding of the Farallon Egg Company in 1855 and the turn of the century an estimated fourteen million omelettes were gathered on South Farallon (a serious impaction on the breeding colony, one assumes), and the continuous presence of rapacious hominids on these rocks had a devastating effect not only on murres but other bird life as well. In order to reduce competition from scavenging gulls (which also had a taste for embryonic murre) gatherers routinely stepped on gull eggs and chicks as they went about their business.

Post-Sierra Club man doesn't go around traipsing on occupied nests. We have learned that when we are excessively greedy and take all the eggs in the basket, allow for standing room only in the pasture, or destroy one part of an ecosystem to promote growth in another, we are the ultimate losers. But we have not yet learned (or are unable to learn) to adapt our habits to our habitat; we are not actually convinced that our collective presence in the wilderness is disruptive; and we are certainly unwilling to consider the propo-

sition that there are places on Earth where we might not need to go at all. So the restraints that have been imposed by governmental agencies and private individuals controlling public access to most of California's islands are probably the only way to insure an acceptable recovery from the sins of our past.

FROM THE California border to the tip of Washington's Olympic Peninsula, the smooth line of the Landsat coast is broken only by the mouth of the Columbia, Willapa Bay, and Grays Harbor. No islands whatsoever. Then, as if to make up for unconscionable neglect, business picks up with a vengeance—the San Juans, the Canadian Gulf Islands, Vancouver Island, that whole broken littoral through the Strait of Georgia, Johnstone Strait, Queen Charlotte Sound, Hecate Strait. Somewhere in some musty file numerical statistics for this vast archipelago must exist, but the merest sample indicates how utterly unlike this part of the Pacific is from its southern counterpart. At high tide the San Juans alone number over 450 "islands," some of them no more than cairns poking above the water, others encompassing a land area over fifty square miles. There are another two hundred in British Columbia's Gulf Islands just to the north, along the leeward side of Vancouver Island (itself over 13,000 square miles in size), and hundreds more as one follows the Inside Passage north to Port Hardy and Cape Scott.

Much of this entire region remains pristine wilderness, though much of it is being ferociously logged, overfished, and loved to death by ever increasing hordes of tourists. It harbors the world's largest concentrations of orcas, or killer whales. Bald eagles are so commonplace one grows blasé and forgets to notice. Chinook and coho salmon run in such quan-

tity that any piscator with a hoochie and a hook can snag *something* for dinner. Oysters crowd the shore; there are shrimp in the northern inlets. Cedar, hemlock, and Douglas fir cover the mountainous terrain in growths so thick that clearcutting is the only method that allows them to fall (or so the argument goes). In short, the area is incredibly rich in natural resources, and because of its climate (it is referred to locally as "the banana belt" and the "Mediterranean of the Pacific") and its abundant rainfall, it seems limitless in its ability to provide. It isn't, but it is going to be some time before that message is broadly heard.

Environmental problems in the Northwest, when they arise, are concerned with questions of multiple use far more than is the case on islands in the southern biogeographical region. They have to be. There are 7,000 permanent residents on the Canadian Gulf Islands,

350,000 on Vancouver Island, and 8,000 on the San Juans. It is a little unpopular to talk about limits and restrictions in the face of such a population, many of whom are hell-bent to turn the place into a field-and-stream paradise for sportsmen, tourists, retirees, second-homeowners, and urban in-migrants; many others of whom are hell-bent to turn it into board-feet and pulp products. Ninety percent of Vancouver Island, for example, is forested, and ninety percent of the forests are leased to lumber companies. One-third of the total work force is employed in the lumber business. As for the tourist business, one old joke goes that B.C. stands for Brochure Country and not, as rumor previously had it, British Columbia.

Not everywhere in the San Juans is a Friday Harbor, of course, and not all of Vancouver Island is Victoria. The Nature Conservancy owns and manages several preserves in the San Juans, the U.S. Fish

and Wildlife Service has designated some minor islands and rocks as bird and marine-mammal refuges, the Canadian and provincial governments have established a few parks. Many of the islands are uninhabited (so far), and there are the usual citizen groups who doggedly fight the lumber industry, the fishing industry, the speculators and developers. But timber and tourism constitute the region's economic base, and as long as there is a buck to be made off what appear to be endlessly bountiful natural resources, "environmental protection" is not soon going to gain ascendancy in the collective north-west conscience.

PRESERVATION remains, however, the major concern on the more fragile island environments off the California coast. Aided by such legislation as the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Coastal Zone Management



The sunflower star (*Picnopodia helianthoides*, below), hunts prey in a tidepool on Malcolm Island. The westward view from Mount Constitution on Orcas Island (right) includes portions of the San Juan and Gulf islands.

Act, recovery in some areas is not only a hope but is actually taking place. The possibility of a total relapse in the aftermath of a massive oil spill remains a threat, but southern sea otters, once thought extinct, have returned to an estimated population of 1,600 to 1,800 animals—though none have yet recolonized any of their island habitats. Guadalupe fur seals, which were not even resighted until 1928, are approaching 2,000 in number—though again no breeding colonies have returned to the California islands, and only a few males have been sighted off San Miguel and San Nicholas. Not yet cause for celebration, perhaps, but better than extinction. The northern fur seals, whose only breeding ground in the eastern Pacific south of the Pribilof Islands is on San Miguel, numbered 100 individuals in 1968. Today that tally has increased to over 2,000. And there are now thought to be stable communities of harbor seals and California sea lions throughout the Channel Islands as well as farther north at Año Nuevo and the Farallons. The elephant seal has become . . . ubiquitous. Virtually extinct by 1915, the world population now totals over 50,000 animals.

Unfortunately, the fascination man has with viewing wild creatures in their native habitat is not reciprocated. Only the elephant seal seems somewhat indifferent to the presence of man in his midst. All other pinnipeds are panicked by an incautious approach; their sudden exodus into the water resembles a stampede that occasionally results in the crushing or abandonment of newborn pups. Sufficiently disturbed, seals and sea lions have been known to abandon breeding areas altogether. So have seabirds. A 1980 environmental assessment of the Channel Islands by the National Park Service observes in reference to three species of cormorants that nest there: "All . . . are known to be extremely sensitive to



human disturbance. A single, appropriately timed disturbance can result in a total reproductive failure when a colony is flushed by a single intensive event." I suppose even a greenhouse slug might take umbrage at repeated intrusion. For that matter, human beings might suffer reproductive failure if every time they headed for the harem they encountered a boatload of tourists.

So it seems not unreasonable to argue that, in the few places presently unsullied by human development, we preserve them as they are, and that, moreover, we leave their biotic communities to their own devices—not merely unmolested but unobserved. As in *alone*. It is a paradox, to be sure—federal land, public land, much of it (in the words of the Park Service mandate) set aside "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." And yet the most sensible assessment of that benefit is

to keep the people down, if not out, and to protect the brown pelican, the island night lizard, and the globose dune beetle from the island sightseer and the peregrine snoop.

We will not, of course, leave these regions unobserved. The coastal islands that dot our Pacific shore are far more important than mere refuges for marine mammals and seabirds; they are, from north to south, isolated preserves for environmental studies of all kinds. Where they have not been destroyed by abuse or the occasional natural disaster, they are (*because of* their isolation) invaluable laboratories for close scrutiny in fields from paleoethnology to paleontology, from biogeography to biogenetics. It was, indeed, precisely because of the species isolation unique to islands that Darwin was able to support his theory of evolution by natural selection with such a rich body of evi-

dence. And I suppose it might be argued that if we hadn't given him a permit to clatter around on the Galápagos we might still be confident that the earth was created in six days.

The controlled environment that many of the islands of the eastern Pacific provide enables us to study not only the phylogenetic development (survival and extinction) of rare biotic communities, but much about our own origins as well. As Don Kelley, the first editor of *Pacific Discovery*, put it, an island is like a theater in the round; ". . . an observer can not only watch every entrance and exit but can see the direction of each actor's coming or going." We must, no doubt, go and observe. But we might, as we do so, keep Aldo Leopold's warning in mind: "To cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish." ❧